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The Barb Report

Elizabeth Schoppelrei
Wright State University

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The Barb Report

ELIZABETH SCHOPPELREI

ENG 4830-01: Advanced Fiction Writing Seminar

Fall 2014

Dr. Erin Flanagan

Dr. Flanagan notes that Elizabeth's short story is funny, smart, compassionate, and delves into issues of sexuality, kindness, masculinity, discrimination, and what it means to respect another person and know one's self. This story is filled with wonderful details, complicated characters, and a sense of how we each, in our own way, try to live in a world that makes sense to us.

I bet it was Barb, Samm thought as she looked around Jack's office at the pictures of family vacations in Florida. Three little blonde heads crowded each photo.

It had to be Barb – her silver-flecked perm and stubby legs that never quite kept up with Terri's water aerobics workout, not like the pink swimsuit lady could – yes, it was definitely Barb. But before Samm could continue her mental accusations, Jack opened the door. A little splosh of coffee leaped to the floor from his mug. He ignored the spill and traveled to his office chair.

"Samm," he said, voice dulled with protocol. "The water aerobics ladies have brought it to my attention that—"

"I know," she said, tucking a piece of hair finally long enough to reach around her ear. "I know what they say. They forget my hearing's still good."

"Excellent," he said. "Well, I guess we're done here." He began to shift around the paperwork on his desk making piles that slouched over.

"Great." Samm jumped up from her seat and walked to the door. Her whistle swung from side to side around her neck. She tried to rub in some of the sunscreen that shone in white strips on her skin. She knew it would never be rubbed in on her back, but at least she should make sure her arms were clear.

"But," she stopped at the sound of Jack's voice, "just don't let it become an issue again, you know?"

"Yeah, sure." She pulled down her sunglasses and looked at Jack from behind the tinted lenses. "No more complaints ever again, boss." Samm gave him a half-salute as she turned back toward the door and walked out into the hallway.

By the time she made it outside to the pool, the whistle had been blown for rest period. Half a dozen neighborhood kids crowded around the lifeguard shack window with their wet dollar bills and slippery quarters. Jude was leaning over to hear the little boy who was too short to see over the window.

"Cheeps," he mumbled. "I want cheeps."

"Chips, Jude," Samm said.

“Whatever, if you know what they want, then you can work concessions. Stupid Mexicans can learn to speak if they’re going to be here.” She glared at him from across the shack. “I mean, I take it back. God, I don’t need you to write another incident report.”

“Yes, because heaven forbid another incident report would teach you how to not be a racist asshole,” she replied.

“Well, it seems like you have your own incident reports to deal with.” He grinned.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“Nothing, just heard about the water aerobics ladies. You sure are classy,” he said. She tossed the bag of chips at him and grabbed the tube. She made it to the lifeguard chair at the top of the hour for her switch off.

She could hear Jude call from the lifeguard shack reminding her to watch the pool and not stare at the people. She hoped another swarm of children would arrive at the concession stand and then maybe he’d focus on something else instead of that ridiculous incident report. The Barb Report. The other guard climbed down and looked over the pool.

Samm tossed the red tube up onto the chair before climbing up with her towel in hand. She laid it over the chair. She wasn’t about to spend another rotation in Jude’s butt sweat. Once the tube’s strap was around her shoulders and the tube rested securely over her legs, Samm blew her whistle.

“Yeah! To the pool!” she heard a boy yell. The children surged toward the water.

“Walk.” She watched them sprint a little faster to the pool’s edge. “WALK.” Some of them slowed down. Good enough.

—

Her dad was halfway into a bite of baked potato when Samm swooshed past the screen door. Andrea was next to him, cradling her glass of Moscato.

“Hey there, stranger. Sit down and eat with us,” he said. “It will be magnificent!” At the word magnificent, he juttied his fork upward

and looked off into the distance as if posing. Samm rolled her eyes at him.

“Nah, Dad. That sounds fun and all, but I’m going to pass.” Andrea started to swirl the Moscato around in the wine glass. Samm wondered if some day she’d get dizzy watching it swirl and decide to do something else, like actually acknowledge Samm’s existence with words. Still even without words, she gave Samm the creeps. Even after her dad and mom had sat down with her and talked. They pulled out their little diagram showing their polycule and explained their newly found polyamory. But she didn’t get it. It should be Dad and Mom. Not Dad and Dad’s girlfriend and Mom and whomever she felt like bringing along for a ride on the Poly Express.

Up in her room Samm pulled out a granola bar from the bottom of her lifeguard bag. She had a hard time opening it up. It was slick from spilled sunscreen, and, even when she did pry it open, it was so mushed she had to dig in the corners of the wrapper to get it all. However, it was better than sitting across the table from dad and Andrea. He made goo-goo eyes at Andrea all the time.

“Want something a little more substantial than that granola bar?” Samm heard a voice coming from behind her. She turned to see Margo in her doorway with two apples and a tuna fish sandwich in her hands.

“Yes, please.” Samm smiled.

“I figured you’d say that,” she said, tossing Samm one of the apples and removing the wrapper from the sandwich. “I saw Andrea’s car – knew you’d be up here hiding.” Margo plopped down on the carpet next to her and broke the sandwich in two, handing Samm the other half.

“How long you think it will last?” Margo said between bites.

“God, not long I hope. Probably just a phase.” They sat for a while in the silence. Samm listened to the chatter downstairs over the crunch-crunch of her apple.

—

“Are you sure you kids don’t need anything? Popcorn maybe?” her dad called up the stairs. Samm and Margot laid on the bed; the TV flashed through cartoon scenes. Margo had chosen *Aristocats* again. Samm had wine a little, but eventually she agreed to the choice.

“We’re good, Mr. Tugend,” Margo shouted.

“You ever think we should pick out a different movie?” Samm said. Margo turned her head to face her.

“What? Miss College-Bound too good for kid’s movies?” she teased.

“Well, considering you and I have memorized every line of this one, maybe we should switch it up a little?” Samm said.

“Now what would be the fun in that?” Margo’s face drew closer. Samm eyed her bedroom door. It was somewhat ajar. She could see a slice of light coming up the stairway from the living room. The muffled speech of her dad downstairs stayed at a constant hum. She looked back at Margo. Her hair had come loose from her ponytail and tickled Samm’s nose. Samm reached up and moved the strands away from Margo’s face, but her hand stayed on Margo’s cheek.

“Come on, Samm,” Margo whispered, “they aren’t coming up those stairs.” Just to be sure, Samm took another look at the doorway and then leaned in.

—

“Margo sleep over again?” Samm’s mom asked the next morning. She placed two waffles on Samm’s plate and went to the pantry to look around for the syrup.

“Yeah, she had to leave early for work though,” Samm replied. Margo always left early. Her manager liked to put her on the opening shift for the only coffee shop in town, and the regulars didn’t like to be kept waiting.

“It’s nice you two are such good friends,” her mom said, but Samm was preoccupied with thoughts of how Margo’s hair smelled

like espresso – sometimes peppermint during the winter months. She saw her mom waiting for her to add something to the conversation.

“Oh, yeah, it is nice—” The syrup dripped down. Samm stopped over each square until the drops pooled nicely below in their own compartments. “So, how was your date last night?” Samm asked. Her mom stopped sipping her coffee and set it down on the counter.

“Fine. He’s not your dad though.”

“Obviously,” Samm said. Her mom turned away, but Samm continued speaking. “I mean, I thought that was the whole point of this.” Her mom picked up her mug and began walking down the hall. Samm looked back down at her waffles and sliced into the first one; the syrup poured over from their little squares rushing down onto the plate. Her mother’s footsteps sounded off farther and farther away.

“Note to self: do not mention that ever again,” Samm whispered.

—

When Margo stopped by on her break with a coffee and bagel for Samm, Barb kept staring from the pool. Jude was up in the chair watching over the women and tapping his foot to *Twist and Shout* as the water rippled from their arm circles.

“Hey.” Margo leaned in and kissed Samm’s cheek. Samm kept staring back at Barb. Water droplets coated her glasses. She insisted on wearing those in the water. Samm doubted the old lady could even see her too well from across the pool. “What – are you in a staring competition?”

“If I break eye contact, she’ll think I am the weak one.”

“Or, she’ll think you’re checking her out again and write another report about the extreme dangers of bisexual lifeguards.” Samm finally cracked a smile at this.

“Yeah, you’re right, better to not watch over the pool – let ’em all drown.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” Margo started to laugh. “Here, drink your coffee.” Samm grasped the paper cup and took a sip. Their cool-down song had ended, and the water aerobics ladies began

to shuffle out of the pool and up the ramp. Barb grabbed her floral swim bag from the bleachers. She glanced over at Samm and muttered something to the pink swimsuit lady who was standing next to her. Then she speeded past the opening of the lifeguard shack.

“Ma’am, be careful. It can get a bit slick through here,” Samm said. Barb slowed down her steps but didn’t acknowledge Samm. Samm thought she even saw Barb shudder at the warning.

After Margo had said goodbye and Samm spent one rotation in the chair watching swim lessons below, she found herself in Jack’s office once more. She asked him about his family and the three little blonde heads in the photos, but he didn’t want chitchat. Instead, he said, “Barb worries you’ve been staring at her again. She says you were watching her, and I quote—” he looked down at the incident report on the table in front of him, “—very intently.”

“I was back-up scanning the pool from the office. When she got out of the pool, I noticed she was traveling very quickly over the concrete where it’s painted *Walk*. You know how slick those painted letters get when the puddles start forming,” Samm had told him about the puddles forming weeks ago. The walkway wasn’t angled right. People always slipped there, and that damn paint was always so slick.

“Yes, I see.” He grabbed his pen and then reached for the stack of post-its next to Samm. The post-it notes were too far away though, and Samm picked them up and held them out to him. Maybe this time he’d remember to mention the puddles. She saw him stare at the stack in her hand, but he stopped short and instead flipped to the second page of the incident report. “I’ll tell maintenance later. But Barb also mentioned you had a visitor this morning. Apparently, there may have been a kiss involved.”

She thought back to this morning and rewound until she remembered: the good morning kiss when Margo walked in. Shit.

“I was down from the chair. My—” she paused and looked at the family photos around the room: middle-class, happy family. She studied their faces. Nope, no clues as to how Jack might feel about these things. It was hopeless. So she sighed, “My girlfriend stopped by to visit.”

“Oh,” Jack said. It caught on the back end of an exhale – an *oh* that barely made sound at all. “Well, you might want to keep that stuff away from the premises. It makes them–” Jack tried to staple the two pages of the incident report together. The stapler was empty. He shuffled around for the box of staples before opening it and spilling the contents. Finally, a bunch of staples found their way into stapler, and he pounded it down on the corner of the papers.

“It makes them uncomfortable, the patrons I mean. Well, it’s just not that kind of establishment, to be honest. I mean, uh, we do accept anyone, but the workers do have to pass that drug screening though, but we do try to accept anyone.” Samm kept staring at the two papers Jack stapled. They didn’t line up. One was askew, at an angle on top of the other.

“I hear you loud and clear, boss,” she said.

“Good, I hoped this would–”

“Yep, I’ll make sure to never be myself on the property. Wouldn’t want that, would we? You know, people. Existing. As themselves. In the world.” She rose up from the office chair.

“Samm, just visit with your friend when you’re not at work. Simple.”

“Yeah, simple.” She thought back to this morning and getting to see Margo. Even though she did see her so often, every time she noticed something new. This morning it was the pumpkin creamer in her coffee. Margo must have opened up the seasonal shipment in the storeroom to get it this early for her.

And nothing was simple.

—

“Sorry I got angry at you this morning. That New Relationship Energy your father has is really getting to me,” her mom said. Samm poked at the beef stew. She would have to look up New Relationship Energy in the glossary of poly-terms sitting on her desk. It might make her mom happy to see a crease on the packet anyway.

They sat for a few more minutes at the kitchen table scraping at their plates.

“Is Dad out with—”

“Yep. Third night this week.”

Samm focused back on the stew.

“You know it’s fine. I am fine with it.” Her mom removed her glasses and set them down. She rubbed the bridge of her nose with her fingers, and then peered at Samm.

“Yeah, polyamory. I know. I know you’re cool with him and Andrea. I feel like we’ve gone over this. Several times.”

“No, that’s not what I am talking about,” her mom said. She picked up her glasses and put them on again. Her eyes seemed too big, magnified now. “I ran into Barb today at the store. You remember, she taught your Sunday school class back when, well, yeah.”

“Oh.” The stew became very interesting. Samm kept her eyes down and began mashing the carrots and creating orange hills and mountains. It would be a fine landscape. The broccoli florets could be trees if they could figure out how to stand up straight.

“She tried to tell me something is wrong with you. I told her nothing is wrong with my kid.”

“Thanks.” One of the broccoli florets managed to fight off gravity and stood up. Next step: a forest. “Because I was really worried something was terribly, terribly wrong.”

“Don’t get snarky,” her mom said. Samm finally looked up at her mom. She was sort of smiling. Maybe this would be a good thing. The knowing part. “But don’t think Margo is still going to stay over all the time.”

Maybe it wasn’t going to be the best thing. The knowing part. Her mom must have seen the frown on her face.

“Not so sneaky now, are you?”

“Yeah, about that...” Samm smiled.

—

She forgot to plan out the rotations so that Jude would be up for water aerobics that Friday morning instead of her. Usually it was simple math – adding up how many thirty-minute rotations until the

women arrived and then making sure to take every other rotation to miss them – but somehow, this morning, she forgot. Samm stood with the lifeguard tube propped up next to the chair; the water sample in its plastic cylinder rested in her hand.

Her eyes never left the pool as she dropped five drops of R-004 into the sample. It turned a shade of orange; the pH was still at a nice 7.3. She heard the smack of flip-flops approaching and caught a flash of floral swim bag from the peripherals of her vision.

“Your mom shouldn’t have left the church. She should have kept you in there,” someone murmured from behind her. She didn’t want to take her eyes off the pool though to turn around – it wouldn’t be good lifeguarding. “The other ladies don’t like it either; believe me. I’ve talked to all of them about what you are.” Samm didn’t respond. She poured out the water sample in the gutter of the swimming pool and brought the tube near her. She hugged it tightly against her body.

When the flip-flops smacked away, she ascended the few rungs up to the chair. Across the pool deck, she saw Barb set down her swim bag on the bleachers. During the warm-up songs, Samm let her eyes flick over Barb’s figure as she scanned the water. She never kept them staring in that direction for very long. Her head muddled up with memories of church: Barb chastising her when she colored outside of the lion’s outline and yellow spilled onto the lamb next to it, and then again the first Sunday they didn’t go to church. She had wondered why they didn’t that morning, but no one stopped to explain it to her. They just stopped going.

She looked over the water once more, glazing past Barb’s figure bobbing. Samm kept scanning. The pink swimsuit lady lifted the foam dumbbells up and down. She never strayed from Terri’s instructions like Barb, never modified an exercise to help arthritic knees and weakening arms. But in the up and down motion of the foam dumbbells, Samm saw her let go of them. The dumbbells popped up to the surface, no longer held underwater by pink swimsuit lady’s hands or her old-person strength. They rested on the surface of the water, blue and white striped, and Samm saw it. Saw them floating there along with the motion of the water.

The pink swimsuit lady had slumped over. Barb reached out for her.

“Alberta. Alberta, what’s wrong?” Barb asked. Samm brought her whistle up to her lips and gave three shrill blasts. With her tube under her arms, she shouted, “Clear the pool,” and jumped from the lifeguard chair.

She hit the water. Her tube carried her up. Arm strokes against the water, she moved toward the shallower end. Jude came running out on deck with the backboard.

“Shit! Is she dead?”

“Dammit, Jude, just get over here.” Pink swimsuit lady was draped over Samm. Samm’s arms wrapped over her shoulders securing her against the red tube squished between them. The backboard clattered to the concrete as Jude ran over to the edge of the pool to take the lady’s wrist in his own hands. He stood on the deck and held her up next to the wall of the pool.

Samm hopped out of the pool as soon as Jude had the lady’s wrists. The water aerobics class exited up the ramp but stared at Jude and Samm.

“Alberta?” Barb had exited the pool and was shuffling over to the bleachers where the rest of the class stood. “Alberta, please. Say something.”

Samm stood next to Jude and submerged the backboard. He turned Alberta onto it, giving Samm one of her arms, and, on the count of three, they grasped the edge of the backboard, holding her stable, and pulled her out of the pool. The backboard rested between Alberta’s back and the concrete of the deck.

“One-one thousand, two-one thousand...” After ten counts Samm still couldn’t feel a pulse. She didn’t see the chest raise either. She pulled out the mask from her fanny pack.

“Shit. Shit, we are so screwed,” Jude said.

“Shut it. You know what to do. Get me the AED and oxygen.”

She tilted the woman’s head back and gave one breath in. The chest moved upward.

“Don’t get close to her face like that,” Barb cried out from a few yards behind her. “Move away from her.” Samm didn’t reply. Jude

returned carrying the AED and the case with the oxygen tank inside. He fumbled opening the AED, but eventually snapped it open. Samm went into her first compression.

The heel of her palm pressed hard against Alberta's sternum. She felt the rib cage give under the pressure. The next compression, she heard the snap. One rib bone broken – god she hoped it wasn't floating around in there about to puncture a lung.

"Stop touching her!" Barb tried to walk up to Alberta's body, but the water aerobics instructor held her back.

"Scissors, now." Jude handed her the scissors and opened the AED. It began spouting out instructions – the placement of the pads. They had to get the pads on Alberta's chest. She had to cut off the swimsuit. Samm brought the scissors near the top of the pink swimsuit, ready to bring them down through the fabric.

"No. Don't you dare!" Barb shouted. Samm brought down the scissors. Barb pushed past Terri's figure blocking the way. She felt Barb's footsteps pound on the concrete; she snipped another inch into the pink swimsuit. Jude set the bundled-up towel next to her leg ready to wipe down Alberta's chest.

"Tear open package and remove pads. Tear open package and remove pads," The AED repeated in the background. She snipped farther down the middle of the suit. Barb's voice grew louder in her ears. She was coming closer and closer. Samm snipped the last bit of fabric right before the abdomen and peeled the halves back. Taking the towel from her side, she began wiping off the droplets of water.

"Don't touch her." Barb's pace quickened. "Don't touch her anymore." Jude made eye contact with Samm for a moment, and then he stood up. Barb surged toward Samm.

Jude jumped between them. The chest was finally dry. She applied the sticky defibrillation pads to Alberta's chest: one higher up on the right side, the other lower down on the left side of her chest.

"Just let her do her job," Jude raised his voice. Barb struggled against him. He had her wrists in the loose grasp of his hand.

"No. She can't be touching women like that."

"She's saving her life," he said. "Now back up." The AED began searching for Alberta's heart rhythms.

“Shock advised. Shock advised,” it beeped. Samm watched Barb back up from Jude. He let her hands fall back to her side. She stared one last time in Samm’s direction before turning back to the group of ladies standing at the bleachers. Samm heard the sirens in the parking lot. EMS would be here soon.

“Just let her do her job,” Jude said one more time in the direction of the women. Samm scooted back from Alberta’s body. Her body jerked upward as the electric shock coursed through it.

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